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ABSTRACT

A study examined the Federal Government's role in adult literacy. A far-reaching plan of action for the Federal Government was proposed that was based on an understanding of national literacy need and the structure and politics of Federal Government. The focus of the current national literacy movement was found to be seriously flawed in fundamental ways; without a stronger and different federal leadership role the overall effort would not meet the national need despite the best efforts of all currently involved. Although the need for the national literacy effort to remain focused on all the groups that are now being targeted was reaffirmed, adult illiteracy was seen as a largely economic problem and a higher priority for currently employed persons was urged. Six objectives for the Federal Government were identified: developing clear national goals and tracking progress toward them; building intellectual, political, and institutional focal points for adult basic education; focusing squarely on problems of adults and on work force literacy; generating large gains in basic skills and holding programs accountable; investing in technology and training; and building on existing services and knowledge. Recommendations were made regarding presidential leadership and legislative initiatives. Seventeen of the recommendations dealt with changes and additions in federal legislation. (YLB)

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JUMP START: THE FEDERAL ROLE IN ADULT LITERACY

ADULT LITERACY: PROGRAMS, PLANNING, ISSUES

A Newsletter for the Business Community

No. 18 January 1989

Business Council for Effective Literacy
1221 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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BCEL BUSINESS COUNCIL FOR EFFECTIVE LITERACY

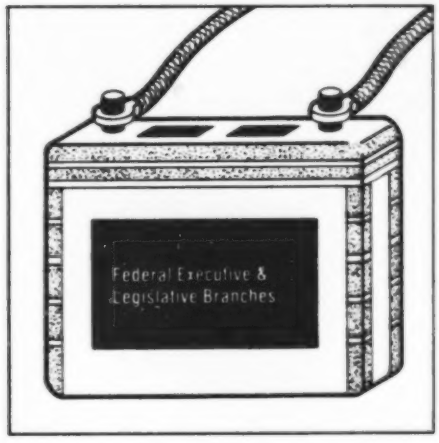
ADULT LITERACY : PROGRAMS • PLANNING • ISSUES

A Newsletter For The Business Community

NO. 18 JANUARY 1989

JUMP START:

The Federal Role In Adult Literacy



Some six months ago, at BCEL's urging, the Southport Institute for Policy Analysis (SIPA) began a new Project On Adult Literacy, an intensive effort to examine the federal government's role in adult literacy–what it is currently, what it needs to be and why.* The study, now completed, was carried out by policy analyst Forrest P. Chisman–with advice from an advisory board, a panel of seven expert consultants who prepared background papers on various substantive issues, more than a hundred experienced literacy and social policy leaders in Washington and throughout the country, and SIPA Chairman Alan Pifer.

The findings of the project, as well as detailed recommendations for the federal legislative and executive branches, were officially released at the National Press Club on January 12, in a report titled *JUMP START: The Federal Role In Adult Literacy*.

JUMP START breaks new ground in several ways. Not only is it the first serious undertaking of its kind, but it is also the first time that

(cont'd. on p. 4)

* The SIPA Literacy Project was funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York, Chase Manhattan Bank, The Exxon Corporation, The Gannett Foundation, The William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, The William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust, Harold W. McGraw, Jr., The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, and The Xerox Foundation.

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the national adult literacy effort has been examined in all its major aspects, and by an independent, nonpartisan source with no vested interests. It is comprehensive in scope, and proposes a bold and far-reaching plan of action for the federal government, based on an in-depth understanding of national literacy need and the structure and politics of federal government. It also has a sound practical sense of the possible.

Mr. Chisman's bottom-line conclusion is that the nation's literacy effort is at a critical point of transition. If, during the next two decades, the nation is to provide effective basic skills upgrading on the massive scale required for productive employment and social functioning, and if it is to reach the many millions of adults in need of that upgrading help, a strong "jump-starting" role by the federal government is seen as absolutely vital. Moreover, Mr. Chisman argues that there is very good reason for strong federal action to be taken in 1989, without delay.

Although *JUMP START* is written primarily for leaders in the federal legislative and executive branches, planners and practitioners at the state and local level will benefit from reading and considering the report. It will tell them what many experts see as an appropriate federal role, and also give them information and analysis that bears importantly on their own literacy programs and agendas.

JUMP START's blueprint for federal action is certain to generate debate. But one thing is clear. There is a wide consensus on the steps that need to be taken at this juncture for the literacy effort to produce real results, and some of those steps can be taken **only** by the federal government.

Finally, it should be noted that *JUMP START* is not SIPA's first foray into federal social policy analysis. Alan Pifer, SIPA's founder as well as its chairman, and Forrest Chisman collaborated for nearly five years, from 1983 to early 1988, on a broad investigation of the future directions of federal social policy. One of their major findings (treated in their 1987 book, *Government for the People*) was that "enhancing the nation's human resources must be the foremost priority of federal domestic policy in the years to come." *JUMP START* is, in a sense, a natural extension of that work.

Because of its importance, SIPA plans to distribute complimentary copies of the full report to a wide national audience. Moreover, to help disseminate the results, and as a service to our own readers, the remainder of this feature article is given to a summary of *JUMP START*'s findings and recommendations.

* * * *

Part I of the SIPA report provides a detailed assessment of the status and focus of the current national literacy movement...the nature of the basic skills problem...assumptions that underlie the literacy effort at all levels of society...and what the nation has so far achieved, **and not yet faced up to**, in efforts to advance adult literacy. It considers whether the adult basic skills problem is as urgent a national issue as literacy leaders claim–and concludes that it is even more so. It considers what the goal of the national literacy effort should be, given social, economic, and demographic reality–and concludes that the focus needs adjusting. It examines how the current approach is structured and supported, drawing two major conclusions: that it is seriously flawed in fundamental ways and that without a stronger and different federal leadership role the overall effort will not achieve what the national need requires despite the best efforts of all currently involved.

Mr. Chisman reaffirms the need for the national literacy effort to remain focused on all the groups that are now being targeted, with current providing organizations given the help they need to play their respective roles effectively. But he also sees adult illiteracy as a largely economic problem, and urges that currently-employed persons be given higher priority. He writes that:

"Seventy-five percent of the people who will constitute the American workforce in the year 2000 are adults today. They are out of school. Most are beyond school age. Most are working...This 75 percent adds up to about 100 million workers...tens of millions seriously handicapped in their work and in their everyday lives by a lack of basic skills.

"All other concerns aside, there is no way the United States can maintain the health of its economy, fend off foreign competition, improve productivity, and, in general, maintain its standard of living unless we substantially increase the skills of our workforce...By the early years of the 21st century, market forces will almost certainly ensure that the quality of jobs and the incomes they produce exactly match the quality of the American workforce. We have a choice between a high-income, high-productivity nation based on a high-quality workforce, or a second-class economy based on a second-rate workforce ...This country is racing toward a demographic deadline...If in the next twenty years we achieve high levels of growth in productivity and real Gross National Product, the demographic deadline need not be of great concern. But unless we meet or surpass the rates of growth in our better postwar years, there is a very real possibility that the American standard of living will simply wither away.

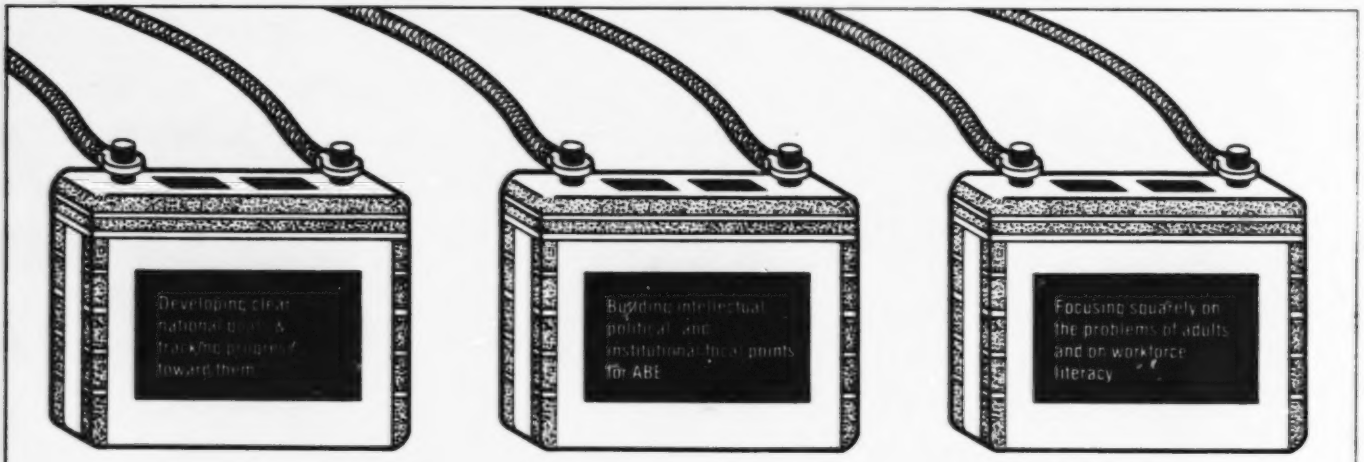
"If we do not achieve high levels of growth," Mr. Chisman stresses, "the economic pie will not be large enough to provide ample portions for all. Both many retirees and many active workers will be left with a meager lot. Generational conflict, conflict between the affluent and the less well-off within generations, increased racial tensions, and social disruptions of other sorts will be almost inevitable...and the United States will become a second-rate nation, fulfilling the predictions of historical doomsayers that we will follow the path of other great powers toward national decline.

"America must do a great many things to avoid that unhappy rendezvous with demographic destiny. And among the most important...is to ensure that...adults seriously deficient in basic skills become fully productive workers and citizens well before the rendezvous occurs." ***The national goal should be to ensure that by the year 2000, or soon thereafter, every adult has the skills needed to perform effectively the tasks required by a high-productivity economy, to the best of his or her ability.***

In assessing the national literacy effort today, Mr. Chisman finds that:

• Despite important accomplishments in the past few years, the vast majority of adults in need of basic skills upgrading are still not being reached by any program, and the average expenditure for the 3-4 million who are being reached is currently less than $200 a year (compared to $4,000 per year for each public school child).

• The national effort is intellectually weak and institutionally fragmented. For example, we lack adequate diagnostic and testing tools for measuring learning...have too little research-based knowledge about what works (and do not make very good use of what is known)...rely excessively on volunteers and


Developing clear national goals & tracking progress toward them
Building intellectual, political, and institutional focal points for ABE
Focusing squarely on the problems of adults and on workforce literacy

schoolteachers who work part-time...have barely begun to understand or tap technology (including computers and television) to extend outreach and achieve economies of scale. Moreover, while adult literacy has become everyone's business, it has no conceptual or organizational center. ***No one is in charge, and most importantly, no one in Washington is in charge.***

• There is practically no lobby for literacy. The issue has a low priority on state and local agendas, where even the the best state and city initiatives now hang by "the tenuous thread of the personal interest of a governor or first lady." Even among federal agencies responsible for literacy, the issue is "well down on their list of priorities, usually submerged under some other mission."

For all of the reasons given, and to serve the bottom-line interests of business as well as the "imperatives of policymakers," Mr. Chisman argues that 1989 needs to be a break-through year for adult basic skills in the United States, and that it can be "if the president and Congress will move to the head of the parade and make it so." To meet the national need and the demographic deadlines, "the United States must create a coherent and effective system of basic skills education from a host of scattered and, for the most part, embryonic efforts." To accomplish this, it must do six things:

(1) Establish clear national literacy goals and mechanisms to track progress toward those goals.

(2) Create stronger intellectual, political, and institutional focal points for the basic skills effort that will strengthen its knowledge base and substantive underpinnings, and foster more effective and better-coordinated systems of service delivery and policy.

(3) Focus squarely on the problems of adults (school reform, though vitally needed, will not solve the problem of adult basic skills!), and, in particular, on workforce literacy.

(4) Demand systems that produce large gains in basic skills and hold programs accountable for achieving those gains.

(5) Make the necessary investments in technology, training, and administration to bring all of this about.

(6) Build on the strengths of the field now in place, including the existing knowledge base.

For these things to happen, "the federal government's role...must be to jump start a more substantial national effort than has existed to date. It must help create the conditions within which states, localities, businesses, organized labor, volunteer groups, community-based organizations, and individuals can solve the basic skills problem well before the year 2010."

In sum, the federal government "must energize the system and catalyze new efforts... establish the source of information and expertise badly needed by everyone working in the field...coordinate and target existing efforts toward high-priority needs, and encourage large-scale, robust experimentation that will lead to new structures within which an effort commensurate to national needs can grow. Some of this can be accomplished by restructuring existing federal programs. Some of it will require new initiatives. None of it is very difficult or expensive. But it requires action now."

A. PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP

A. 1. In the early months of his term in office, *the president should clearly establish the enhancement of adult basic skills as a major national priority and workforce literacy as a major priority of his administration.* He should devote at least one major speech to this purpose and challenge governors, mayors, business and labor leaders, and others to develop large-scale initiatives of their own, affirming Washington's readiness to work in partnership with them.

A. 2. *The president should establish a high-level task force on adult basic skills, with a six month deadline* to: (a) further evaluate present federal activities and the overall national effort, (b) develop a statement of national goals and set objectives for the federal government that will contribute to meeting them, (c) propose a process for coordinating federal activities, and (d) suggest new federal initiatives. The task force should be chaired by the first lady, the vice president, or some other distinguished American. Members should include the secretaries of Labor, Education, Health & Human Services, and Commerce, the director of the Office of Personnel Management, representatives of state and local government, business and labor leaders, and the literacy field itself.

A. 3. To promote executive branch coordination... and facilitate rapid federal action, *the task force should recommend, and the president should appoint by executive order, a Cabinet Council on Adult Literacy*. Membership should be the same as recommended for the task force in A.2. The Council should meet at least quarterly to set national goals and track progress toward them, monitor the overall national effort, coordinate and oversee programs within the executive branch, and develop new program initiatives. A primary responsibility of the Council should be to devise, coordinate, and implement new government-wide initiatives in workforce literacy.

B. LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES

The near-term federal legislative program should take the form of a comprehensive new bill, the Adult Basic Skills Act of 1989. **Twenty-six specific provisions are proposed for the Act and, if fully enacted, they would result in the redirection of several billions of dollars in existing federal, state, and local spending for adult basic skills, and new annual spending by the federal government of about $550 million annually.**

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Two provisions would provide the stronger intellectual and information base needed to effectively advance the national literacy effort:

B.1. *As its highest legislative priority, a National Center for Adult Literacy should be established* with broad responsibility for the nation's research, development, training, and policy agenda, as well as information dissemination. The Center should be a not-for-profit quasi-governmental corporation under the supervision of a board including the secretaries of Labor, Commerce, Education, Health & Human Services and the director of the Office of Personnel Management, as well as representatives of state and local government, business, labor, the research community, and the literacy field. The chairman and all non-federal board members should be appointed by the president, with the advice and consent of Congress. A first priority of the Center should be to develop and assist in the adoption of nationally-recognized performance standards by which to measure learners' progress and evaluate program effectiveness. Many of the Center's functions should be performed by a specially-recruited staff of experts, but the Center should also be authorized to make grants or contract for services, to sponsor demonstration projects, and to enter into contracts to provide specialized services and to charge fees. ($30 million per year)

B.2. *The Departments of Labor, Education, and Health & Human Services should be required to set aside no less than $7 million each from their existing research budgets for research, technical assistance, and policy analysis to improve the adult basic skills programs they fund.*

Four provisions address the need for developing a larger cadre of professionally-trained basic skills teachers and program managers, as well as the need for a substantially larger investment in developing the role of technology for instructional purposes. A primary goal of the provisions is to overcome barriers to state and local action through a program of federal incentives.

B.3. *Restrictions should be removed on what portion of state grants may be spent for improving the quality and cost-effectiveness of instruction by teacher training or the purchase of technology systems or services*–in the Adult Education Act, the Job Training Partnership Act, the Vocational Education Act, the Family Support Act, and other federal legislation that provides substantial support for basic skills instruction.

B.4. To stimulate advances in these vital areas, *the federal government should match state and local investments in teacher training and technology on a one-to-one basis.* Initially, it should set the amount of its match at some percentage of the appropriations for each program and then increase that percentage in subsequent years. A reasonable percentage to begin with would be one percent of existing program funds for training and one percent for technology, escalating to three percent for each purpose over a period of years. ($88 million initially)

B.5. *To encourage cost-effectiveness and maximum use of resources and to promote cooperation among basic skills programs, all relevant federal legislation and regulations should be amended to provide that equipment and facilities of any adult basic skills program receiving federal funds should be available free or at cost to any other program receiving federal funds, and it should be available at cost to corporate efforts, community-based organizations, volunteer groups, or others not receiving federal funds.*

B.6. *A $10 million literacy leader training fund should be established on an experimental basis.* Its purpose would be to increase the number of highly-qualified full-time professionals in the adult basic skills field, especially individuals with educational, managerial, and organizational ability who can provide leadership in establishing and managing basic skills programs, in training instructors, and in developing and implementing public policy.

Noting that "the federal government should look to the states as the primary public institutions for coordinating and upgrading the delivery of adult basic skills services," three provisions of the proposed new Act would strengthen their ability to do this.

B.7. *The Adult Education Act and the Vocational Education Act should be amended to provide an 8 percent set-aside that state governors may use for innovative programs and the improvement of basic skills service delivery systems*–similar to the set-aside of the Job Training Partnership Act.

B.8. *To receive either the new 8 percent set-aside or the JTPA set-aside, governors should be required to establish statewide mechanisms (of their choosing) to coordinate the delivery of basic skills instruction within their states and with other states.* Each coordinating body should be required to submit to the governor a statewide plan with measurable goals for enhancing the level of basic skills within the state. The plan should cover at least all federally-supported and state-supported programs, and the state coordinating body should report annually on progress made toward the goals it establishes. Each state plan should be submitted to the federal Cabinet Council on Literacy, which should set formal requirements as a condition of funding.

B.9. *The federal government should make matching seed grants to the states for the development of state resource centers for basic skills education.* These centers would have a variety of coordinating, informational, and upgrading missions, among them to provide leadership in developing teacher training programs and systems, and promoting and helping to implement good teaching practices. ($26 million)

The remaining 17 recommendations all aim to enable the federal government to "set its own house in order." Mr. Chisman is convinced that "to exert effective national leadership, the federal government will need to implement changes in virtually all of its programs that presently provide support for the field." He notes, however, that "those changes will simply accelerate trends that are already under way in the evolution of federal programs."

The Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA)

B.10. *A new title authorizing basic skills training for the employed should be added to JTPA*, which is found to be a "fundamentally sound program." It would be devoted to large-scale workforce literacy demonstration projects, and focus specifically on persons already working, an area of major neglect at the current time. Funding preference would be given to statewide or industry-wide systems, with demonstrations to involve both large and small businesses, a full range of educational provider organizations, and a variety of instructional approaches. ($100 million)

B.11. *The Department of Labor should issue new standards for JTPA's adult Title II-A and III programs, to allow states the option of spending more funds for basic skills training and to extend the training period for basic skills participants.* The new standards should accept basic skills "need," unemployment status, and economic hardship as criteria for eligibility in the programs, at the discretion of the states.

The Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act

In reauthorizing the Act in 1989, Congress should reorient it toward current workforce needs in a number of ways to ensure that students gain basic skills required by the workforce.

B. 12. *Establish basic skills competency as one primary goal of the Perkins Act.*

B. 13. *Require states to develop measures of basic skills competency required by employers in their states today and in the years to come.*

B. 14. *Require basic skills competency, or programs that will produce it, for participation in any job-specific vocational education program receiving federal funds, and give states more discretionary control over the use of such federal funds.*

B. 15. *Fully fund the Adult Training and Retraining portion of the Perkins Act, either with new appropriation or from funds appropriated for other purposes.* ($50 million)

The Adult Education Act (ABE)

Mr. Chisman writes that "although [ABE] is, paradoxically, one of the smallest federal basic skills programs, [it] is one of the most important, because anyone with basic skills problems is eligible to participate in it. It serves both people in need of assistance with the general range of basic skills and English as a Second Language (ESL) students. It also provides support for high school equivalency courses. The program has been needlessly underfunded over the years and relegated to a position of low visibility within the Office of Vocational Education of the Department of Education. In addition, the demand for ESL instruction in certain parts of the country has been so great in recent years that only about half of ABE's current resources are available for general basic skills training."

To upgrade ABE and build on the successes of its ESL component without jeopardizing its general skills mission, six steps are recommended:

B. 16 *The position of Assistant Secretary of Education for Adult Literacy should be established.* This position should carry line responsibility for the ABE program and staff responsibility for coordinating all Department of Education basic skills activities. This action would put the responsibility for basic skills in Education at the same level that already exists in Labor and Health & Human Services.

B. 17. *Fully fund the ABE state grant program at its authorized level of $200 million.*

B. 18. and B. 19. Because limited-English-speaking persons are the fastest growing segment of the population and the workforce, *create separate funding for ABE's ESL programs and appropriate $200 million solely for this purpose. And, in 1991, when the current provisions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act expire, transfer the education provisions to ABE*

and authorize and appropriate in 1992 an additional $300 million a year for ESL.

B. 20. *The provision in ABE that now prohibits states from spending more than 20 percent of their federal ABE funds for high school equivalency classes should be abolished or the limit raised significantly* so that the funds are more responsive to actual state and local need.

B. 21. *Give governors the discretion to designate someone other than their chief state school officer to administer state ABE programs.* In some cases, this will help them integrate ABE programs into overall statewide plans.

The Family Support Act Of 1988 (Welfare Reform)

Under the JOBS program in this Act, states have great flexibility to devote funds to education, training, job placement, and other services to welfare recipients to enable them to become self-sufficient through employment. Consistent with a greater national emphasis on workforce literacy:

B. 22. *Congress should require that the states determine the basic skills levels of all participants in the JOBS program and that the individualized plans required by the program should include basic skills instruction for any participants whose skills are seriously deficient*, both while they are receiving welfare benefits and during the one-year period of employment during which the Act makes other social services available. The goal is to ensure that the participants get services that will in fact increase their employability. (Also see B. 23.)

The Even Start Program

Homes in which parents have reading and other basic skills problems tend to produce children with those problems. Even Start was set up on a "quasi-experimental" basis last year to promote family literacy with programs that teach the basic skills to both parents and their children. The early results are encouraging, but the program is currently funded at less than one-third of the authorized level.

B. 23. *Even Start is an important initiative in both basic skills instruction and expanding services to disadvantaged children. Its appropriation should be increased to its authorized level of $50 million.* In addition, through the Cabinet Council or other mechanism, the Even Start approach should be tried out with welfare recipients under the Family Support Act.

The Federal Workforce & Other Services Vital To The Nation

Mr. Chisman points out that the federal government has no "program of basic skills training for any of the one million federal civilian employees who may require it." He also points out that vital public service industries that receive large amounts of federal funding, such as health care, transportation, utilities, and public-safety services, also have significant basic skills problems that have not been squarely faced up to. Failure to address these needs jeopardizes the national interest.

B. 24. *Congress should mandate a General Accounting Office study of the need for basic skills investment in the federal workforce, and it should mandate a study by the Office of Technology Assessment of industries receiving substantial federal resources or otherwise vital to the national interest.* Congress should act on the recommendations.

Volunteers In Service To America (VISTA)

VISTA uses about one-third of its funding to supply volunteers to local literacy programs, making it an important support for the field. The program's authorization expires in 1989.

B.25. *The VISTA program should be reauthorized in 1989. It should also receive an additional $3 million appropriation for joint ventures with national volunteer organizations and community-based organizations to experiment with innovative uses of volunteers in literacy programs.*

Program Enhancement

B.26. To substantially upgrade the quality of the American workforce, *all federal programs providing basic skills training (including but not limited to those mentioned above) should be required to (a) develop plans for program enhancement and (b) regularly report the extent of progress toward these goals.* The purpose of the first requirement is to enable the nation's basic skills training system, within 10 years, to move at least half the participants in federal programs to at least the minimal level of basic skills needed to perform effectively the tasks required by a high productivity economy and to function effectively in an increasingly complex society.

• • • •

The concluding remarks to the SIPA report are both poignant and prophetic. "As with all public issues," cautions Mr. Chisman, "the danger is that the opportunity to achieve major advances in adult literacy will pass us by." If the present opportunity is not seized and a powerful national response is not pressed vigorously, the loss to the nation and to all Americans as individuals will be tragic and irretrievable. Fortunately, the timing and the climate are right for a bold federal response to the national literacy need, and Congress and the administration seemed poised to act.

"A combination of humanitarian concerns, regard for civic values, and a growing appreciation of the nation's bottom-line interest in a more highly skilled workforce have created a coalition of concern that cuts across political parties, ideologies, regions, and all walks of life. With widespread political support, powerful values at stake, and a near-consensus on both ends and means, adult literacy presents the nation with a rare opportunity to move ahead rapidly toward national achievements in which we all can take enormous pride. Nineteen eighty-nine is the year in which this can begin to happen."

Mr. Chisman knows that to come to grips with the national adult basic skills problem will be an undertaking of major proportion, but as noted at the outset of this article, he sees it all as "do-able," provided that the adult education system is reformulated along the lines suggested by the above recommendations, and provided that the responsibility for that reformulation "is placed squarely in the hands of some agency or group and if the goal is stated by Congress and the Administration in unequivocal terms."

(For more information or a copy of *JUMP START: The Federal Role In Adult Literacy*, write to Southport Institute for Policy Aanlysis, 440 First Street, NW, Suite 415, Washington, D.C. 20001, or phone 202-783-7058.)

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